

The Random Jottings of Donald Jay from Nelson in Pendle.

Ribblehead navvies .

In the late 19th century, the small community of Ribblehead was bustling with activity as the Settle-Carlisle Railway was being constructed. The air was filled with the sound of hard labor and the scent of alcohol that often accompanied the exhausted navvies after their long shifts. With a majority of the population being young and single men, marital problems were bound to arise in the homes left behind.

The women of Ribblehead bore the brunt of the household responsibilities, taking care of their own children as well as the lodgers who sought shelter in their homes. Living without modern conveniences made their tasks even more challenging, and the strain on marriages became evident. Stories of infidelity and elopement between navvies and married women began to circulate, shedding light on the crumbling relationships within the community.

One such scandal involved William Farrell, who found himself in court for running away with the wife of George Garnett. After absconding with George's purse containing a considerable sum of £20, William and the unfaithful wife had settled in Great Harwood, near Blackburn, where they were eventually apprehended.

However, one of the most sensational cases occurred when William Harding, a railway worker on the Settle-Carlisle line, found himself in dire circumstances. In May 1876, as the railway project neared completion, William had to seek work elsewhere and left his wife, Rachel Harding, with £40, intending to reunite their family once he had made the necessary arrangements. Rachel, at around 48 years old, had been married to William for 25 years and had an astonishing seventeen children, of whom only seven survived.

When William returned after a brief absence, he was greeted by his eldest daughter, who shocked him with her bruised and swollen eyes—a result of her mother's misconduct. Rachel had engaged in an affair with Samuel Cooper, a 27-year-old navvy who had recently lodged with the Harding family. When the daughter confronted her mother, Samuel did not hesitate to strike her. Seizing the opportunity, the couple fled, taking with them their baby, all available money, two watches, clothing, trunks, and bedding.

Distraught, William immediately involved the police, who eventually tracked down the couple in Barrow. Samuel Cooper was arrested and brought to Bradford for a court appearance.

However, the charges against him only pertained to stealing two boxes, a bolster, and a pillow—there was no mention of a wife involved. Since the hearing took place in Bradford, which was not within the jurisdiction where Samuel received those stolen goods, the prosecution team decided against presenting evidence and asking the jury to convict him. As a result, Samuel was acquitted, much to his good fortune.

William Harding, a lifelong railway tunneler from Cheshire, had married Rachael Davis from Carmarthen. Their journey together had taken them to various locations, including Wales, Truro, Cornwall, and Bristol, with children added to their family along the way. The baby Rachel had taken with her was Arthur Walter Harding, who was baptized at St Leonard's in Chapel-le-Dale on June 3, 1874. In all subsequent census records, Alfred Walter described his birthplace as "Jericho," referring to the shanty town where he was born. Unfortunately, there are no further records available for Rachel, Harding, or Cooper. William, now described as a widower, resided on the moors above Oldham with his four children, including the youngest, Arthur Walter, who was often listed as "out of work" in the census returns.

Amidst the marital turmoil that plagued Ribblehead, another tragic incident unfolded. Thomas Cook, a 30-year-old platelayer working on the railway in Carlisle, reached a breaking point in his married life. Unable to bear the strain any longer, he decided to take his own life, leaving

behind a chalk message on a nearby wall. The message served as a warning to all young men: "I take the pleasure of writing these few lines, if it will be a warning to all young men never to live with a mother-in-law. Now I end my miserable existence."

The marital problems of Ribbleshead's navvies were a reflection of the harsh conditions and hardships faced by both men and women during that era. The temptations and struggles of the railway construction project brought about heartbreak, scandal, and sometimes even tragedy, leaving a lasting impact on the community.

By Donald Jay